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## Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism; Defining the students' need in Standardized Language Proficiency Tests

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### Abstract

*The debate between prescriptivists and descriptivist continuous to date, which interestingly affects the way the standardized language proficiency tests (should) work. The notion of correctness in such high stakes test raters attracts more attention in relation to fairness of using specific criterion in the assessment. The present paper discusses the belief of prescriptivism and contrasts it with the view of descriptivist – especially to what actually occurs in the Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language. Therefore, the paper clarifies whether prescriptionist features are prominent in the learner approximations and need to be taught explicitly, and clarifies whether the learner errors encompass other elements and describing the target language to the learners is more important. There are four prescriptivist pronouncements discussed – splitting infinitive, stranding preposition, the use of will and shall, and the use of who and whom. The study found that there are two pronouncements that break the rule. Therefore, English practitioners – teachers, should ‘open’ themselves to both views and able explain explicitly to the students both historical overview and its standing position of the views to date. As for assessor, a tendency of using the exact, predictable, and stable rule are indeed significantly important. They, however, also need to realize the inevitable evolution of language and in that regard descriptivist should not receive any false judgement especially in the high stakes test.*

**Keywords:** Descriptivism, Prescriptivism, TEFL/TESL, High Stakes Test.

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### 1. Introduction

Whenever a language is learned and used, we may often find an ultimate question that addresses the state of a language; whether the language should be viewed as based on descriptivism with how language *is used*, or through prescriptivism with how language *should be used*. This debate does not only happen in the practical use of everyday life of English usage, but also affect high stakes tests, such as IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge Exam, and the like. For that reason, Uysal (2010) critically reviewed IELTS writing task to see the universality of the notion of correctness in IELTS raters by particularly addressing the reliability and validity of the test regarding the claims of IELTS to be an international test of English. He found that there are some issues such as the fairness as the result of using a single prescriptive criterion in the assessment. Building on to this point, I assume

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that there should be a further research that addresses the issue of prescriptivism (and contrast it to the descriptivism) to see what happened in the practice of teaching English as a foreign/second language (henceforth TEFL/TESL) and how these issues related to the high stakes assessment, especially in IELTS writing. Therefore, the present paper discusses the notion of prescriptivism and contrasts it with the view of descriptivism; especially to what actually occurs in the Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language (henceforth TEFL/TESL). The focus of this paper, then, would be: first is to clarify whether prescriptionist features are important or prominent in the learner approximations and need to be taught explicitly. And second, to clarify whether the learner errors encompass other elements and describing the target language to the learners is more important.

Therefore, the structure of this paper would be: first about the overview of the notion of prescriptivism and descriptivism from several selected scholars which includes the origins of prescriptivist pronouncements, of which it is more on historical overview, and then relate it to how language users treat the language today. The second would be looking at the context of TEFL/TESL and its relation to high stakes assessment in which in this paper would focus on IELTS writing. The third would explain the methodology I used and then followed by a discussion of the findings. Finally, the conclusion would sum up the whole paper.

### ***Historical description of Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism: and Selection of Academic Views***

Around 15th to the latest 16th centuries, English gained notoriety, but at the same time, there was a concern about English being imprecise and becoming an ambiguous communication because of making it linguistically rich (Cole, 2003). For that reason, there was an urge of making a set of rules as a reference of matter of correctness and incorrectness. However, the different usages inevitably occurred. These happened because every writer has their own individual judgement regarding what was correct and incorrect (Cole, 2003; Curzan, 2014). The debate then moved to the one similarities that English had a prior age, in which linguists agreed-upon English had a “pure time” and that English could be restored to that period. Still, this idea triggered even bigger differences because every writer claimed himself as the one who owns the pure period (Cole, 2003). Around several decades later, Robert Lowth (1710-1787) who was a strong prescriptivist, published “A Short Introduction to English Grammar” in 1762. Lowth wrote several books on English grammar of which the key reason was to “teach what is right” in which most of his judgements were reinforced by analogies to Latin grammar (Curzan, 2014).

Leonard (1929) as cited in Drake (1977) stated that prescriptivist in England in 18<sup>th</sup>-century attempt to control and regulate the uniformity and conformity of language through an absolute standard, of which it implies authority; *order, stability, predictability* and *reason*. In his discussion, Drake (1977) emphasised that what prescriptivist was trying to enforce as the basic principle of correctness was conformity. Cole (2003) mentioned that prescriptivist claimed themselves ‘as authorities with power to prescribe and proscribe English usage’ (p. 134). Moreover, she referred the prescriptivists as the one who codify and enforce the rules of English usage. Another scholar, Kroeger (2005) mentioned that when it comes to prescriptivism, the rules about using language are consciously learned, of which it is learned in school. These pronouncements define the standard form of the language through an explicit policy by an authority. Curzan (2014) and Cole (2003), furthermore, also mentioned that there are some language etiquettes in which it prescribes us to such usages. In this paper, there are five prescriptive rules are presented, they are:

- a. do not split infinitive – it is wrong to put adverb in between ‘to’ and ‘bare infinitive, in which *to* must be followed by only *infinitive* and should not be interfered by any other words, i.e. adverb, e.g., I have **to really help** her now, (Borjars & Burrige, 2013; Curzan, 2014).
- b. do not end sentence in prepositions – ‘sentence-final prepositions are also condemned as improper’, e.g., who are you talking **to?**, (Cole, 2003, p. 136).
- c. do not use double negation – two negatives are equivalent to the rule of affirmative, e.g., I **didn’t do nothing**, (Lowth, 1762 as cited in Cole, 2003).
- d. shall vs will – ‘shall’ is for first person (singular: *I* and plural: *we*), while ‘will’ is for second and third person, e.g., I **shall** do this, but **he will** do that again (Cole, 2003).
- e. who vs whom – who signifies subject (nominative) and whom is used for (indirect) object (dative), e.g., **the chancellor** gives a speech to **the audience** (Cole, 2003).

On the other hand, Joseph Priestly (1733-1804), who was more of a descriptivist, against most of Lowth’s views. Priestly described that – for example in the issue of will vs. shall; *shall* can only be used in a formal condition and limited to first person which make the frequency of usage is occasional, whereas *will* can be interchangeably used with shall, and suits in any circumstances (formal and informal), and that *will* is widely accepted among the society (Cole, 2003). Descriptivism according to Drake (1977) focused on analysing the functions of language in actual use. He argued that descriptivist concentrate to “*change over stability, diversity over uniformity, usage over authority, and spoken over written*” (p.1). Kroeger (2005) mentioned that when it comes to descriptivism, the rules about using language are naturally and unconsciously learned from the members of the speech community; e.g., parents, friends, teachers, and so on. In Kroeger’s view, the emphasis of the argument is not on whether these rules are standardized or not, but it is more onto the observation, description, and analysis of what speakers actually say; of which it constitutes the grammar of the language.

### **TEFL and TESL context and its relation to High Stakes Assessment (IELTS writing)**

Being successful in such high stakes test like IELTS is one of the big goals and has become an important phase of lives for EFL/ESL. This is because the standardized tests are often used as the prerequisite to being accepted into the universities especially overseas. To be successful, the students must have a good English command; listening, reading, speaking, and writing, of which they mostly learn that skills and knowledge in the English institutes (government or private sector). Therefore, it is crucial to revisit what really happened in the class where the learning process takes place. Some students may find an English teacher who teaches the usage of English descriptively by considering some changes over time, such as the interchangeable usage of will and shall, splitting infinitive, and the like. Whereas some others are often found to be strictly prescriptive in the class by presenting some pronouncements as have been explained above; no splitting infinitive, no stranding preposition, and so on. Drake (1977) argued that the notion of stability in prescriptive view of which emphasised that language is in the state of stable over time can help the students to understand the writings from the past. However, if usage preferences are conservative; prescription resistant to language change, thus, there is a tendency for prescription to lag behind the colloquial language (Curzan, 2014).

Building on to this point, there is a correlation between what has been learned in the class as input and how the learners answer the question in such high-stakes test such as IELTS writing as output. What makes it problematic is that the issue of fairness in IELTS

writing assessment (Uysal, 2010). He argued that the assessment is found to be vague as the band descriptors do not tell much – for example grammatical range and accuracy is very general which is highly possible to be ambiguous. Another issue concerning both views is that a writing assessor for IELTS writing may consider the idea of “correctness and incorrectness” based on only one specific view; prescriptivism, in which a particular grammar may unacceptable in prescriptivism’s pronouncements, but it is finely accepted in the descriptivist view. Therefore, it is important to re-evaluate: what actually the students need in the EFL/ESL context; does prescriptivism plays an important role; and what learners errors say concerning these both views.

## 2. Methodology

As for the methodology, among many high-stakes test; TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge Exam, and the like, I choose IELTS because first IELTS is the most popular EFL/ESL test around the world, and second, I have my individual experience on IELTS test, and finally IELTS claims to be an international English test (Uysal, 2010). In this study, I use eight (8) samples of IELTS writing band five (5) from IELTS-Blog. The reason for that is because I have limited time to collect the data, while IELTS-blog has provided some samples along with the errors and the corrections. These samples of writing will be analysed by looking at four rules based on prescriptivist:

- a. splitting infinitive
- b. stranding preposition
- c. the use of will and shall
- d. the use of who and whom

I posit these four pronouncements to be analysed because they are high frequency/more common occurred. Therefore, in the next part, I will discuss these with the findings to see if prescriptivism features play a role in any of the errors and to find out what the errors can generally tell regarding the prescriptivism and descriptivism.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

In this segment, I will discuss the findings related to four pronouncements above. They are as follows:

**Table 1.** Prescriptivist Pronouncements

Pronouncements	Findings							
	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Sample 4	Sample 5	Sample 6	Sample 7	Sample 8
Splitting infinitive	<b>*to really avoid...</b>	none	none	none	none	none	none	none
Stranding preposition	none	none	none	none	none	none	none	none
The use of will vs shall	none	none	none	none	none	none	none	<b>*we will not...</b>
The use of who vs whom	none	none	none	none	none	none	none	none
Total	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

In the table, the findings tell us that among eight samples, it is found two cases that break the prescriptivism rule while most them follow. One case of splitting infinitive in

sample 1, and one case of the use of will vs shall in sample 8. Regarding splitting infinitive, the sentence found in sample 1 is “I agree with the fact that punishment is the way to \*really avoid the crime ...”, whereas for the case of using will vs shall, the sentence found in sample 8 is “**we will** not need natural fuel”. Now let me discuss each of those pronouncements in the following.

### **Splitting Infinitive**

In the sample 1 data, I found there are 13 times use of ‘to infinitive’ (see appendix), one of which is split by the adverb *really*. Whereas the rest of samples; 2-8, I do not find any splitting infinitive occurs which means sample 2 to 8 are all obeying the *to infinitives* rule from prescriptivist - without any splitting happened in between. Therefore, this finding concludes that almost all the writing samples abide by the prescriptive rule of which “do not split infinitive”. In sample 1, the test taker wrote:

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(1.a) I agree with the fact that punishment is the way to \*really avoid the crime ...

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According to prescriptivist, this sentence is wrong because of the splitting infinitive. Lowth (1762) argued that there should be no word in between *to* and *bare infinitive*, and that he suggested, adverb (in this case “*really*”) should come before or after *to infinitive*. Therefore, the sentence should be like this:

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(1.b) I agree with the fact that punishment is (*really*) the way to avoid the crime ...

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In my opinion (regardless both views) the adverb *really* is not necessary for the sentence, as I could say “... punishment is the way to avoid the crime...”, and the meaning is still complete. However, regarding descriptivism, these sentences: (1.a) and (1.b), have a different meaning. In the sentence (1.a), the meaning could be that the writer believes 100% that punishment is the best way to avoid the crime, while in the sentence (1.b), the emphasize is not as strong as sentence (1.a). It could mean that punishment is one of many ways to avoid the crime.

From this finding, it is found only one case of splitting infinitive in one sample out of eight in which it could mean that what the student has learned in school was about the rules of prescriptivism, albeit the teacher does not explicitly tell them that the rule they learn is based on prescriptivist. This has been explained by Kroeger (2005) that the prescriptivism is learned consciously in school whereas descriptivism is naturally and unconsciously learned from their surrounding speech community, like parents, friends, coach, and so on.

### **Stranding Preposition**

Regarding the stranding preposition, I do not find a single case that breaks the rule of prescriptivism. All prepositions used in the samples abide by the rule of prescriptivism in which proscribe preposition ends the sentence. Lowth (1762) as cited in Cole (2003) argued that sentence that ends with preposition be considered as colloquial, improper, and inelegant. From this view, I can argue that since the (IELTS) writing is considered as formal, there should be no colloquial, improper, and inelegant, that refer to stranding prepositions. However, the question that may arise that “do the students know this rule that ends the sentence with preposition is considered as colloquial, improper, and inelegant?”. According to some scholars, (see Sundbay et al. 1991; Cole, 2003; Curzan 2004), stranding preposition is often happened in the speaking because of it happens

spontaneously while in writing, the writer often have plenty of time to recheck and restructure the sentence, and that it is occasional to find stranding prepositions in the writing piece.

Regarding the EFL/ESL context which based on my experiences, the teacher does not allow to end/stop the sentence with preposition as he considered it as unfinished sentence. Borjars & Burridge (2013) added that to attest preposition, it should occur before noun phrases, such as at grandpa house; should take an object form of the pronoun, e.g., I threw a party for him; and preposition works to link its noun phrase to another part of the sentence.

### **The use of Will vs Shall**

In the sentence, I found one case of simple future is expressed by *will* instead of *shall* in the first person (plural: *we*). For prescriptivists, they argued that the use of *shall* and *will* is intolerably interchangeable. Lowth (1762) mentioned that *shall* is specifically used for the first person (singular and plural, I and we, respectively). However, *will* is used with the second and third person (he, she, it, you, and they). And that referring to that view, the sentence (2.a) *will* should be changed to *shall* because the rule says *we shall* (see (2.b)), and not *\*we will*.

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(2.a) ...we *\*will* not need natural fuel

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However, Priestly (1733-1804) as cited in Cole (2003) and Drake (1977) argued that language cannot be maintained (forever) to the state of stable (or stagnant), but they believe that there must be a change over stability because people do not stay in one area and interact with the same people in their whole life. In that regard, they emphasize the notion of diversity instead of uniformity.

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(2.a) ...we *shall* not need natural fuel

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Regarding the specific rule for *shall*, Priestly scrutinized that *shall* is a simple future tense that was specifically used only with the first person pronoun where the society was welcome to this specific rule until around the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Priestly added that *shall* only found in a formal situation while *will* can be used for both conditions – formal and informal. For that reason, the society today is more accepting *will* than *shall*, as *will* can be interchangeably used for all pronouns. Therefore, regarding what priestly has said, I would assume that the use of *will* with preceded by the first person (*we*) is not grammatically wrong.

In the context of EFL/ESL, in my experience, I remembered when my English teacher explains that there is a differentiation between the use of *shall* and *will*. Moreover, he explained that *shall* is for first person only, but *will* can be used for all. This means that the teacher is introducing the specific usage of *shall* (which is prescriptivist), but at the same time he opened to some evolution of the language (which is more of descriptivist).

### **The use of Who vs Whom**

Like in stranding preposition case, I did not find any case that breaks the rule of prescriptivism regarding the use of *who* and *whom*. It seems that all samples follow the rule of prescriptivist that *who* is for subject (nominative case) and *whom* is for (indirect) object (dative case) (Cole, 2003). While for a descriptivist, they consider that the use of *who* is not constrained to subject only but also to object. They do not give judgement (right

or wrong) to this phenomenon but rather see it as how the society functions the language in actual use. In EFL/ESL context, these relative pronouns rules are quite clear in the class. In my experience, the teacher explained the grammatical use of relative pronouns and that we can differentiate each use of them.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

There are four prescriptivist pronouncements discussed in this study, and it is found only two that break the rule. In this IELTS writing, not only it is a formal writing, but also high stakes test, and that there is a tendency of using the exact, predictable, and stable rule (like Drake (1977) said) rather than other pronouncements that are more diversity. However, as Uysal (2010) critically reviewed about the fairness of assessment, it might disadvantage for the students who lack knowledge which one is correct and 'almost correct'. This is because the writing assessor for IELTS writing may base his judgement on a specific view; prescriptivism, of which a particular grammar may unacceptable in prescriptivism's pronouncements, but it is finely accepted in the descriptivist view. Therefore, as English practitioners – TEFL/TESL, they should educate themselves and the students the prescriptive usage and explain them explicitly which includes a brief historical overview so that the student realize what actually happened today and how they should react for a particular occasion such as high stakes test. Moreover, the standard rules of the language – spelling, grammar and punctuation which based on descriptivist are also essential for clear, updated, and unambiguous communication with speakers of English around the world. Also, those who purely uphold prescriptivism (whoever they are), they need to be more willing to accept natural changes to the language, of which it is inevitably evolving.

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